

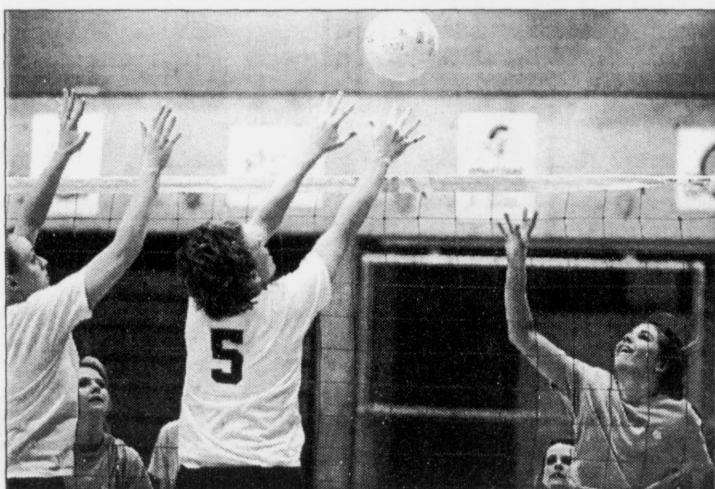
Power play payoffs

Randy Wagner was already excited about the high quality of volleyball in Prince George and the Power League 2000 tournament has done nothing to change his mind.

The game has been growing locally for eight years, estimates the former Olympian and chief organizer of the 20-team men's and women's weekend tournament at the College of New Caledonia. "Every year it seems to get a little bigger and a little better."

The Prince George Youth Volleyball Club has about 300 members in its fifth season. Club volleyball in Prince George has grown from about five or six teams each year to about 35 teams this year, he figures. Club volleyball is separate from high school teams, although many high school players are on club teams for that season from January to May.

Club teams mingled with college teams in the tournament, with the Grande Prairie Regional College Wolves winning the men's title and the Smithers Cheers earning



The Prince George Storm (far court) battle the Grande Prairie Hawks in preliminary-round play at the Power League tournament. JOHN MCKENZIE/FREE PRESS

the women's honours.

The Cheers downed the Grande Prairie Hawks 25-23, 25-23 in the women's championship match.

The Junior Wolves, helped by Kelly Road grads Murray Laidlaw and Jason Weaver, subdued the Fort St. John Pounders 25-23, 25-27, 15-10 for the men's title.

"It's awesome to come back and see all my friends," says the 18-year-old Laidlaw. "Some of them came and watched and that was good to see. It's fun to play back at CNC."

Wagner says Laidlaw and Weaver played well in the tournament. "They're

a couple of really strong players. They were strong in high school and they've only gotten stronger since then."

Grande Prairie finished third in Canada this season. Laidlaw and Weaver got to play after a starter broke an ankle.

"I gained lots of confidence," Laidlaw says. "Hopefully next year I'll come out and be one of the leaders. This year, I wasn't a leader. I was first off the bench, second off the bench. Hopefully next year, I'll start."

Young players with similar ambitions would have had their eyes opened dur-

ing the weekend tournament because they got to play older teams.

"What it does for the younger players is it gives them an opportunity to see first hand what the game is like at a very high level," Wagner says. "The players they're playing against are generally very seasoned veterans and very skilled and very talented. For these young guys to be put on the court with them is really good. The young guys seem to be confident enough to hold their own. Even if they're out-matched, they seem to raise their game up to a higher level."

▼ From B1

Watson looks to next year

next season in spite of losing graduating veterans such as five-year Spruce King defenceman David Keough and his 87 points during the regular season. Other Kings who will be too old to play for their next season are forwards Derek Dinelle (81 points) and Steve Wilejo as well as defencemen Ken Henderson and Paul Fisher.

Watson hopes for big things next season from Lalonde (48 goals), Brent Williams (41 goals) as well as fellow forwards John Morlang, John Hopson, Bill Collins and Kolida.

"The back end could be different not having a Keough, a Fisher or a Henderson back there," admits Watson, who will have to recruit blueline replacements.

Unlike this season, when he had to audition several netminders before settling on Kevin Lapointe as the starter, Watson has a pleasant problem for next season. Lapointe is eligible to return as a 20-year-old. Dean Schultz, a year younger than Lapointe, started five of six playoff games.

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